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BBC News Magazine reports on two Holocaust survivors.

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The Economist on the chances for the Euro.

EVEN as the euro zone hurtles towards a crash, most people are assuming that, in the end, European leaders will do whatever it takes to save the single currency. That is because the consequences of the euro's destruction are so catastrophic that no sensible policymaker could stand by and let it happen.

A euro break-up would cause a global bust worse even than the one in 2008-09. The world's most financially integrated region would be ripped apart by defaults, bank failures and the imposition of capital controls (see [article](#)). The euro zone could shatter into different pieces, or a large block in the north and a fragmented south. Amid the recriminations and broken treaties after the failure of the European Union's biggest economic project, wild currency swings between those in the core and those in the periphery would almost certainly bring the single market to a shuddering halt. The survival of the EU itself would be in doubt.

Yet the threat of a disaster does not always stop it from happening. The chances of the euro zone being smashed apart have risen alarmingly, thanks to financial panic, a rapidly weakening economic outlook and pigheaded brinkmanship. The odds of a safe landing are dwindling fast.

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[John Tamny](#) gives a look at one side of the 1%.

The rise of the Occupy Wall Street movement has brought with it a renewed emphasis on the impoverishing notion of envy. To the Occupiers, along with much of the political class, society's economic rules favor the top 1 percent at the certain expense of the other 99.

Great rhetoric for sure, but also quite a lot of nonsense. People who should know better bemoan the economic means possessed by the 1 percent, but rarely do they consider the gargantuan efforts required by those at the top to get there in the first place.

To show why this is true it's useful to reference an opinion piece written by Thomas Sowell long, long ago. Having witnessed a caricature artist draw a willing individual, when the artist collected his payment after services rendered he was dismayed to hear the customer complain about the "high" cost of something which took five minutes to draw. But as the artist correctly pointed out, the customer didn't see the 25 years of hard work and practice that preceded his ability to sketch an individual in five minutes.

The age of Sowell's op-ed can be measured in decades, his point within concerned the huge upfront investment required by pharmaceutical firms ahead of tiny pills that "cost way too much", but his reasoning surely applies much the same to successful individuals today. The envious see the success on the way to obnoxious anger and calls for wealth redistribution, but very few see all the work and sacrifice that precedes entrance into the 1 percent club.

Considering the myriad business owners that dot the American landscape, as owners they're often demonized for their possession of the means of production. What's left out is the grand deal they're offering the 99 percenters who work for them.

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[NY Times](#) profiles Harvard psychologist who has argued there is less violence in human affairs today.

[Steven Pinker](#) was a 15-year-old anarchist. He didn't think people needed a police force to keep the peace. Governments caused the very problems they were supposed to solve.

Besides, it was 1969, said Dr. Pinker, who is now a 57-year-old psychologist at [Harvard](#). "If you weren't an anarchist," he said, "you couldn't get a date."

At the dinner table, he argued with his parents about human nature. "They said, 'What would happen if there were no police?'" he recalled. "I said: 'What would we do? Would we rob banks? Of course not. Police make no difference.'"

This was in Montreal, "a city that prided itself on civility and low rates of crime," he said. Then, on Oct. 17, 1969, police officers and firefighters went on strike, and he had a chance to test his first hypothesis about human nature.

“All hell broke loose,” Dr. Pinker recalled. “Within a few hours there was looting. There were riots. There was arson. There were two murders. And this was in the morning that they called the strike.”

The '60s changed the lives of many people and, in Dr. Pinker's case, left him deeply curious about how humans work. That curiosity turned into a career as a leading expert on language, and then as a leading advocate of evolutionary psychology. In a series of best-selling books, he has argued that our mental faculties — from emotions to decision-making to visual cognition — were forged by natural selection.

He has also become a withering critic of those who would deny the deep marks of evolution on our minds — social engineers who believe they can remake children as they wish, modernist architects who believe they can rebuild cities as utopias. Even in the 21st century, Dr. Pinker argues, we ignore our evolved brains at our own peril.

Given this track record, Dr. Pinker's newest book, published in October, struck some critics as a jackknife turn. In [“The Better Angels of Our Nature”](#) (Viking), he investigates one of the most primal aspects of life: violence.

Over the course of 802 pages, he argues that violence has fallen drastically over thousands of years — whether one considers homicide rates, war casualties as a percentage of national populations, or other measures.

This may seem at odds with evolutionary psychology, which is often seen as an argument for hard-wired Stone Age behavior, but Dr. Pinker sees that view as a misunderstanding of the science. Our evolved brains, he argues, are capable of a wide range of responses to their environment. Under the right conditions, they can allow us to live in greater and greater peace.

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BBC News

[Last survivors of the Holocaust keep memories alive](#)

by Mark Lowen BBC News, Macedonia

Two remarkable women living hundreds of miles apart were fortunate enough to survive the Holocaust - one became a famous pianist, the other fought with Tito's Partisans.

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Screams

At 89 years old, she is one of the few who remembers the deportation of the Macedonian Jews, sent by the occupying Bulgarian forces to the Nazi German death camp at Treblinka in Poland.



The Holocaust Memorial centre of Macedonian Jews opened in March 2011

Jamila only survived by hiding in Macedonia and then joining Tito's partisan resistance.

As she casts her mind back, her kindly eyes suddenly narrow and a look of sheer anger fills her elderly face.

"I can't forget the screams as the soldiers arrived," she says, almost shouting. "I still dream about them. And now, when I laugh, something aches in my heart."

As the cold, cramped trains filled with deportees wound their way from the Balkans through Central Europe and up into Poland, they may even have passed another camp on the way - Plaszow, just outside the city of Krakow, since immortalised in the film Schindler's List.

Allowed to live

It was there that my grandmother, Natalia Karp, was taken in 1943.

She was a young, beautiful concert pianist from Krakow, trying to escape into the mountains with her sister when she was seized. The two women were sent to Plaszow, destined to be killed.

But the camp commander, Amon Goeth (played in the film by Ralph Fiennes) had one soft spot in an otherwise brutal character - he was a music lover, and the night my grandmother arrived was his birthday.



Natalia Karp survived and played concerts into her 90s

An order was sent out for the young virtuoso Polish pianist to play at his party.

She told me years later how revolted she was by Goeth, dressed in his white uniform and surrounded by beautiful women.

She had not played for four years whilst in hiding. The commander suddenly turned to her.

"Sit down and play," he barked.

She chose Chopin's Nocturne in C Sharp Minor - a piece full of sadness.

As she ended the last note, she paused. The commander turned.

"She will live", he said.

"Not without my sister," my grandmother ventured. "She, too, will survive," Goeth proclaimed.

For 10 months, the two women remained in Plaszow. Then they were moved to Auschwitz Birkenau where, again, they survived.

Courage

When the war ended, my grandmother moved to London. There, she continued a successful career and was, fittingly, elected a member of the Chopin Society.

Natalia continued giving concerts into her 90s. I remember watching her walking - unaided - to the grand piano for her recitals, and playing with such grace.

She always wore short sleeves so that her Auschwitz number tattooed onto her arm remained visible.

And then in July 2007, at the age of 96, she died suddenly of a heart attack.

One of the most important chapters in European Jewish history had closed, said the rabbi at her funeral, as we listened to her recording of the same Chopin nocturne that had saved her life.

The camps bequeathed to my grandmother a determination to survive, a courage that I will forever admire.

Untold suffering

Until the end, she looked so much younger than she was, always able to recall tiny details from years before.

She travelled and entertained and even drove (badly) into her 90s.

She was strong, she loved life, she was seemingly unbeatable. It was even as though she had chosen when to die suddenly, so as not to fade away through illness.

And so as I sat, looking at the gentle face of the elderly Macedonian Jamila, there was a lot of my grandmother there too.

Both were utterly lucid in their old age, both full of warmth.

One had been spared the horrors of the camp but lost her entire family. The other had been spared death but forced to live through beatings at Plaszow and Auschwitz. Both had endured untold suffering in their own ways.

I will always feel a deep connection to the stories of the survivors - Jamila among them.

With every sentence, every image that she paints, I can see my own grandmother Natalia on her way to the camp, and I can picture her decades on, sitting in her north London flat telling me anecdotes over a bowl of chicken soup.

Each of the survivors, each of those who lived through the agony of the Holocaust, passes on to the next generation the responsibility to remember and inform, and ensure that the stories never die.

Of Jamila, of Natalia, and of millions more.

The Economist

Is this really the end?

Unless Germany and the ECB move quickly, the single currency's collapse is looming



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A euro break-up would cause a global bust worse even than the one in 2008-09. The world's most financially integrated region would be ripped apart by defaults, bank failures and the imposition of capital controls (see [article](#)). The euro zone could shatter into different pieces, or a large block in the north and a fragmented south. Amid the recriminations and broken treaties after the failure of the European Union's biggest economic project, wild currency swings between those in the core and those in the periphery would almost certainly bring the single market to a shuddering halt. The survival of the EU itself would be in doubt.

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Markets, manias and panics

Investors' growing fears of a euro break-up have fed a run from the assets of weaker economies, a stampede that even strong actions by their governments cannot seem to stop. The latest example is Spain. Despite a sweeping election victory on November 20th for the People's Party, committed to reform and austerity, the country's borrowing costs have surged again. The government has just had to pay a 5.1% yield on three-month paper, more than twice as much as a month ago. Yields on ten-year bonds are above 6.5%. Italy's new technocratic government under Mario Monti has not seen any relief either: ten-year yields remain well above

6%. Belgian and French borrowing costs are rising. And this week, an auction of German government Bunds flopped.

The panic engulfing Europe's banks is no less alarming. Their access to wholesale funding markets has dried up, and the interbank market is increasingly stressed, as banks refuse to lend to each other. Firms are pulling deposits from peripheral countries' banks. This backdoor run is forcing banks to sell assets and squeeze lending; the credit crunch could be deeper than the one Europe suffered after Lehman Brothers collapsed.

Add the ever greater fiscal austerity being imposed across Europe and a collapse in business and consumer confidence, and there is little doubt that the euro zone will see a deep recession in 2012—with a fall in output of perhaps as much as 2%. That will lead to a vicious feedback loop in which recession widens budget deficits, swells government debts and feeds popular opposition to austerity and reform. Fear of the consequences will then drive investors even faster towards the exits.

Past financial crises show that this downward spiral can be arrested only by bold policies to regain market confidence. But Europe's policymakers seem unable or unwilling to be bold enough. The much-ballyhooed leveraging of the euro-zone rescue fund agreed on in October is going nowhere. Euro-zone leaders have become adept at talking up grand long-term plans to safeguard their currency—more intrusive fiscal supervision, new treaties to advance political integration. But they offer almost no ideas for containing today's conflagration.

Germany's cautious chancellor, Angela Merkel, can be ruthlessly efficient in politics: witness the way she helped to pull the rug from under Silvio Berlusconi. A credit crunch is harder to manipulate. Along with leaders of other creditor countries, she refuses to acknowledge the extent of the markets' panic (see [article](#)). The European Central Bank (ECB) rejects the idea of acting as a lender of last resort to embattled, but solvent, governments. The fear of creating moral hazard, under which the offer of help eases the pressure on debtor countries to embrace reform, is seemingly enough to stop all rescue plans in their tracks. Yet that only reinforces investors' nervousness about all euro-zone bonds, even Germany's, and makes an eventual collapse of the currency more likely.

This cannot go on for much longer. Without a dramatic change of heart by the ECB and by European leaders, the single currency could break up within weeks. Any number of events, from the failure of a big bank to the collapse of a government to more dud bond auctions, could cause its demise. In the last week of January, Italy must refinance more than €30 billion (\$40 billion) of bonds. If the markets balk, and the ECB refuses to blink, the world's third-biggest sovereign borrower could be pushed into default.

The perils of brinkmanship

Can anything be done to avert disaster? The answer is still yes, but the scale of action needed is growing even as the time to act is running out. The only institution that can provide immediate relief is the ECB. As the lender of last resort, it must do more to save the banks by offering unlimited liquidity for longer duration against a broader range of collateral. Even if the ECB rejects this logic for governments—wrongly, in our view—large-scale bond-buying is surely now justified by the ECB's own narrow interpretation of prudent central banking. That is because much looser monetary policy is necessary to stave off recession and deflation in the euro zone.

If the ECB is to fulfil its mandate of price stability, it must prevent prices falling. That means cutting short-term rates and embarking on “quantitative easing” (buying government bonds) on a large scale. And since conditions are tightest in the peripheral economies, the ECB will have to buy their bonds disproportionately.

Vast monetary loosening should cushion the recession and buy time. Yet reviving confidence and luring investors back into sovereign bonds now needs more than ECB support, restructuring Greece’s debt and reforming Italy and Spain—ambitious though all this is. It also means creating a debt instrument that investors can believe in. And that requires a political bargain: financial support that peripheral countries need in exchange for rule changes that Germany and others demand.

This instrument must involve some joint liability for government debts. Unlimited Eurobonds have been ruled out by Mrs Merkel; they would probably fall foul of Germany’s constitutional court. But compromises exist, as suggested this week by the European Commission (see [Charlemagne](#)). One promising idea, from Germany’s Council of Economic Experts, is to mutualise all euro-zone debt above 60% of each country’s GDP, and to set aside a tranche of tax revenue to pay it off over the next 25 years. Yet Germany, still fretful about turning a currency union into a transfer union in which it forever supports the weaker members, has dismissed the idea.

This attitude has to change, or the euro will break up. Fears of moral hazard mean less now that all peripheral-country governments are committed to austerity and reform. Debt mutualisation can be devised to stop short of a permanent transfer union. Mrs Merkel and the ECB cannot continue to threaten feckless economies with exclusion from the euro in one breath and reassure markets by promising the euro’s salvation with the next. Unless she chooses soon, Germany’s chancellor will find that the choice has been made for her.

Forbes

[What You Don't Often Hear About Those 'Greedy' One Percenters](#)

by John Tamny

The rise of the Occupy Wall Street movement has brought with it a renewed emphasis on the impoverishing notion of envy. To the Occupiers, along with much of the political class, society’s economic rules favor the top 1 percent at the certain expense of the other 99.

Great rhetoric for sure, but also quite a lot of nonsense. People who should know better bemoan the economic means possessed by the 1 percent, but rarely do they consider the gargantuan efforts required by those at the top to get there in the first place.

To show why this is true it’s useful to reference an opinion piece written by Thomas Sowell long, long ago. Having witnessed a caricature artist draw a willing individual, when the artist collected his payment after services rendered he was dismayed to hear the customer complain about the “high” cost of something which took five minutes to draw. But as the artist correctly pointed out, the customer didn’t see the 25 years of hard work and practice that preceded his ability to sketch an individual in five minutes.

The age of Sowell's op-ed can be measured in decades, his point within concerned the huge upfront investment required by pharmaceutical firms ahead of tiny pills that "cost way too much", but his reasoning surely applies much the same to successful individuals today. The envious see the success on the way to obnoxious anger and calls for wealth redistribution, but very few see all the work and sacrifice that precedes entrance into the 1 percent club.

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Basically the owners provide the capital, conceive the business plan, and then if the plan fails, as owners they stand to lose all that they ventured. As for the allegedly exploited laborers, they get paid no matter what. Not a bad deal.

In modern times cable television visionary [John Malone](#) is known for his billions, along with landholdings said to be greater than those held by any other American. Not often mentioned is that on the way up, desperate to keep his cable vision afloat, he shared motel rooms with fellow owner Bob Magness.

Of course many of today's owners began as employees, and even there we perhaps learn that the 1 percent are made of different stuff. Looking for work in an increasingly prosperous [Cleveland](#), OH in 1851, John D. Rockefeller's biographer Ron Chernow observed that for the future titan of commerce, "prospects were momentarily bleak." As Rockefeller later described it, "No one wanted a boy, and very few showed any overwhelming anxiety to talk with me on the subject. But as Chernow put it, "When he exhausted his list [of potential employers], he simply started over from the top and visited several firms two or three times. Another boy might have been crestfallen, but Rockefeller was the sort of stubborn person who only grew more determined with rejection."

Readers of the above doubtless sense a rhyme to Rockefeller's early history with that of the late [Apple](#) CEO, [Steve Jobs](#). As Jobs' biographer Walter Isaacson recounts in his book about the man, Jobs arrived at Atari's offices early in his career and told those willing to see him that he would not leave the premises without a job offer. Having written a major bestseller that was more recently turned into a blockbuster film, Kathryn Stockett, author of *The Help*, is firmly ensconced now inside the top 1 percent. What's perhaps less well known is how many years it took Stockett to write her book, not to mention the 60+ [rejection letters](#) she received from agents before finding one willing to take her vision to publishers.

1 percenters generally have the nerve, drive and self-assurance that the rest of us could only dream of. We see where they are or were, but what the envious among us never consider is what they did to get there.

Former Congressman Richard Gephardt once said that the rich, far from having achieved wealth through hard work, had simply won "life's lottery." The story of the Rolling Stones as told by guitarist Keith Richards exposes Gephardt's musings as patently absurd.

Indeed, as Richards noted about the band's early days, "Benedictines had nothing on us. Anybody that strayed from the nest to get laid, or try to get laid, was a traitor. You were supposed to spend all your waking hours studying Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, Little Walter,

Howlin' Wolf, Robert Johnson. That was your gig. Every other moment taken away from it was a sin."

Grant Achatz is the chef/owner of Alinea which is widely considered America's best restaurant, and surely by now among the demonized 1 percent. But what many don't know is that he got his start flipping eggs at his parents' diner in Michigan.

Importantly, it's not where we start in life that dictates where we end it, and having learned the basics as a child and teenager, Achatz eventually matriculated to the Culinary Institute of America. Once there, not content to rest on the achievement of having gotten in, Achatz skipped the "bars and partying" that animated the experiences of his classmates and instead "hit the gym every day and then spent each night reading cookbooks." Early sacrifices that others wouldn't make now have Achatz at the top of the culinary world.

He may not know it, but Achatz would have soulmate in the form of Aaron Rodgers, Super Bowl-winning quarterback of the Green Bay Packers. Those who only know the modern Rodgers story might think of a wildly talented athlete with a brilliant arm who only knows how to throw touchdown passes all the while collecting millions from his employer.

What they don't know is the different path he took in high school so that he could get where he is today. As Rodgers' high school friend Ryan Gulbrandsen told *Sports Illustrated* recently, "We both just decided that we wouldn't be the kids who would party in high school." Instead, Rodgers studied hard in school (1310 SATs), and also unrelentingly studied football film.

Despite all the work and sacrifice, as a high school senior Rodgers could claim stature of the 5'10", 165-pound variety, which was decidedly not the stuff of Division 1 college football. Though he could have played in the Ivy League given his academic prowess, Rodgers went the JC route, impressed the coaches at Cal, eventually starred there, but even then he was forced to agonize on NFL Draft day as 23 teams passed him by in the first round.

Rodgers' reward for waiting 23 picks with cameras fully trained on him was to be drafted by the Green Bay Packers; *Brett Favre's Packers*. When Favre eventually left Green Bay Rodgers had to suffer a fan base very loyal to Favre, and that was none too happy to see him under center. The rest is history now, Rodgers is a few more great seasons away from the Hall of Fame, and his millions put him well into 1 percenter category. What's unknown is how many of us 99-ers would have done what he did to get there.

It's said also about Rodgers that during practice as a backup to Favre, that he "took every scout-team possession like it was the last possession of his life." This rhymes with the stories basketball fans used to hear about Michael Jordan. The Jordan they saw on television possessed staggering talent, but less known was the fact that Jordan, much like Rodgers, approached every practice like it was his final game. Jordan and Rodgers, both one percenters, and both extraordinarily hard workers.

It should be said that right or wrong, much of the angst about the 1 percenters is directed at Wall Street, or the investment bankers and traders who supposedly get paid for "moving money around." The naivete there is staggering.

As Schumpeter noted, investment bankers are capitalists *par excellence* for securing the capital that has enabled all the great individuals listed here to accomplish what they have. After that, it would be interesting to know if many in the Occupy crowd have friends in the investment banking world.

It seems they don't, because if they did they'd understand that these providers of capital have no lives, particularly the ones who make the millions. Without defending the bank bailouts for one second, Wall Streeters are generally paid large sums because they're engaging in work that very few know how to do, that is highly valued by the marketplace, and that can disappear with one bad deal. In short, we decry the financiers of our economic ascendance at our peril.

It was presumably F. Scott Fitzgerald who once observed that "the rich are different from you and me." Yes they are. The rich, or as they say today, the 1 percent, generally work a lot harder and smarter than do the rest of us, and for doing so, make all of our lives easier, cheaper, and more entertaining.

What's not said enough about the 1 percenters is how difficult were their paths, but perhaps even more to the point, how much easier and better our paths will be for what they did ahead of us. Rather than bemoan their wealth, it's time we start thanking them.

NY Times

Human Nature's Pathologist

by Carl Zimmer

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — [Steven Pinker](#) was a 15-year-old anarchist. He didn't think people needed a police force to keep the peace. Governments caused the very problems they were supposed to solve.

Besides, it was 1969, said Dr. Pinker, who is now a 57-year-old psychologist at [Harvard](#). "If you weren't an anarchist," he said, "you couldn't get a date."

At the dinner table, he argued with his parents about human nature. "They said, 'What would happen if there were no police?'" he recalled. "I said: 'What would we do? Would we rob banks? Of course not. Police make no difference.'"

This was in Montreal, "a city that prided itself on civility and low rates of crime," he said. Then, on Oct. 17, 1969, police officers and firefighters went on strike, and he had a chance to test his first hypothesis about human nature.

"All hell broke loose," Dr. Pinker recalled. "Within a few hours there was looting. There were riots. There was arson. There were two murders. And this was in the morning that they called the strike."

The '60s changed the lives of many people and, in Dr. Pinker's case, left him deeply curious about how humans work. That curiosity turned into a career as a leading expert on language, and then as a leading advocate of evolutionary psychology. In a series of best-selling books, he has argued that our mental faculties — from emotions to decision-making to visual cognition — were forged by natural selection.



He has also become a withering critic of those who would deny the deep marks of evolution on our minds — social engineers who believe they can remake children as they wish, modernist architects who believe they can rebuild cities as utopias. Even in the 21st century, Dr. Pinker argues, we ignore our evolved brains at our own peril.

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Over the course of 802 pages, he argues that violence has fallen drastically over thousands of years — whether one considers homicide rates, war casualties as a percentage of national populations, or other measures.

This may seem at odds with evolutionary psychology, which is often seen as an argument for hard-wired Stone Age behavior, but Dr. Pinker sees that view as a misunderstanding of the science. Our evolved brains, he argues, are capable of a wide range of responses to their environment. Under the right conditions, they can allow us to live in greater and greater peace.

"The Better Angels of Our Nature" is full of the flourishes that Dr. Pinker's readers have come to expect. He offers gruesomely delightful details about cutting off noses and torturing heretics. Like his other popular books, starting with "The Language Instinct" (1994), it is a far cry from his first published works in the late 1970s — esoteric reports from his graduate work at Harvard, with titles like "The Representation and Manipulation of Three-Dimensional Space in Mental Images."

From Irregular Verbs, a Career

He came to Harvard after graduating from McGill University in 1976. At the time, he was convinced that a life in psychology would allow him to ask the big questions about the mind and

answer them with scientific rigor. “It was the sweet spot for me in trying to understand human nature,” he said.

But he quickly realized that such explorations would have to wait. “You can’t do a Ph.D. thesis on human nature,” he said. “So I studied much smaller problems — academic bread-and-butter problems.”

He began by studying how we picture things in our heads, looking for the strategies people use to make sense of the visual information continually flooding the brain. As he worked on his dissertation, however, he recognized that many other scientists were also tackling the same problems of visual cognition.

“There were a lot of people studying them who were doing a better job than I could,” he said. So he looked for another problem.

The field he settled on was language, and it proved to be consuming. For Dr. Pinker, it was “a window into human nature.” Linguists have long debated whether language is a skill we develop with all-purpose minds, or whether we have innate systems dedicated to it.

Dr. Pinker has focused much of his research on language on a seemingly innocuous fluke: irregular verbs. While we can generate most verb tenses according to a few rules, we also hold onto a few arbitrary ones. Instead of simply turning “speak” into “spoke,” for example, we say “spoke.”

As a young professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he pored over transcripts of children’s speech, looking for telling patterns in the mistakes they made as they mastered verbs. Out of this research, he proposed that our brains contain two separate systems that contribute to language. One combines elements of language to build up meaning; the other is like a mental dictionary we keep in our memory.

This research helped to convince Dr. Pinker that language has deep biological roots. Some linguists argued that language simply emerged as a byproduct of an increasingly sophisticated brain, but he rejected that idea. “Language is so woven into what makes humans human,” he said, “that it struck me as inconceivable that it was just an accident.”

Instead, he concluded that language was an adaptation produced by natural selection. Language evolved like the eye or the hand, thanks to the way it improved reproductive success. In 1990 he published a paper called “Natural Language and Natural Selection,” with his student Paul Bloom, now at Yale. The paper was hugely influential.

It also became the seed of his breakthrough book, “[The Language Instinct](#),” which quickly became a best seller and later won a place on a list in the journal *American Scientist* of the top 100 science books of the 20th century.

Dr. Pinker used the success of the book to expand the scope of his work. “It gave me the freedom to return to these much larger questions, informed by what I could learn about real humans,” he said.

For the past 17 years, he has alternated between wide-ranging books on human nature, like “How the Mind Works” (1997) and “The Blank Slate” (2002), and books focused on his research, like “Words and Rules” (1999), about irregular verbs. He writes at the apartment he shares with his wife, the novelist Rebecca Goldstein, and at a house on Cape Cod.

Cause for Optimism

As a public intellectual, Dr. Pinker has engaged in a series of high-profile debates about evolutionary psychology. In 1997, the Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould accused him and other evolutionary psychologists of seeing fine-tuned adaptations in every facet of human existence.

Evolutionary psychology, Dr. Gould wrote, “could be quite useful if proponents would trade their propensity for cultism and ultra-Darwinian fealty for a healthy dose of modesty.”

Dr. Pinker gave as good as he got. He declared that Dr. Gould was “scrambling things so that his opponents have horns and he has a halo.” ([Dr. Gould died in 2002.](#))

Then there is the question of male and female minds. In 2005, Lawrence H. Summers, then president of Harvard, [caused an uproar](#) by speculating that one reason for the underrepresentation of women in tenured science and engineering positions was “issues of intrinsic aptitude.”

Dr. Pinker (who had moved from M.I.T. to Harvard in 2003) came to Dr. Summers’s defense, and ended up in a high-profile debate with a fellow Harvard psychologist, Elizabeth Spelke.

Dr. Pinker argued that there were small but important biological differences in how male and female brains worked. Dr. Spelke argued that these differences were minor, and that evolutionary psychology had no part to play in the debate.

“The kinds of careers people pursue now, the kinds of choices they make, are radically different from anything that anybody faced back in the Pleistocene,” Dr. Spelke said at the close of the debate. “It is anything but clear how motives that evolved then translate into a modern context.”

In a way, “The Better Angels of Our Nature,” is a response to this kind of critique. He says the idea for the book took root in his mind around the time of his debate with Dr. Spelke, when he stumbled across graphs of historical rates of violence. In England, for example, homicide rates are about a hundredth of what they were in 1400.

In 2006 Dr. Pinker was invited to write an essay on the theme “What Are You Optimistic About?” His answer: “The decline of violence.”

The reaction to the essay was swift and surprising. “I started hearing from scholars from fields that I was barely aware of, saying, ‘There’s much more evidence on this trend than you were aware of,’ ” he said.

Researchers sent him evidence that violence had declined in many other places, and in many different forms, from the death rate in wars to rates of child abuse. “I thought, ‘This is getting to be a conspiracy.’ It was beyond my wildest dreams. I realized there was a book to be written.”

Dr. Pinker set out to synthesize all these patterns and find an explanation for them. And in the process, he wanted to rebut stereotypes of evolutionary psychology.

“There’s a common criticism of evolutionary psychology that it’s fatalistic and it dooms us to eternal strife,” he said. “Why even try to work toward peace if we’re just bloody killer apes and violence is in our genes?”

Instead, Dr. Pinker argues that evolutionary psychology offers the best explanation for why things have gotten better, and how to make them even better.

Civilization’s Effect

“Better Angels” has impressed many experts on historical trends of violence.

“Steven Pinker’s great achievement is to weave these trends into a much larger pattern of reduced violence, greater empathy and, indeed, a comprehensive civilizing process,” said Nils Petter Gleditsch, a research professor at the [Peace Research Institute Oslo](#) in Norway.

Human violence started dropping thousands of years ago with the formation of the first states, Dr. Pinker argues. For evidence, he points to archaeological studies and observations of stateless societies today. With the birth of the first states, rates of violence began to fall, and they have dropped in fits and starts ever since.

Dr. Pinker grants that these results may be hard to believe, but he thinks that is more a matter of psychology than of data. The emotional power in stories of violence — whether on the nightly news or on “Law and Order” — can distract us from the long-term decline.

He acknowledges, of course, that the past century produced two horrific world wars. But he says they do not refute his argument. Statistical studies of war reveal a lot of randomness built into their timing and size. The 20th century, he argues, suffered some particularly bad luck.

Dr. Pinker finds an explanation for the overall decline of violence in the interplay of history with our evolved minds. Our ancestors had a capacity for violence, but this was just one capacity among many. “Human nature is complex,” he said. “Even if we do have inclinations toward violence, we also have inclination to empathy, to cooperation, to self-control.”

Which inclinations come to the fore depends on our social surroundings. In early society, the lack of a state spurred violence. A thirst for justice could be satisfied only with revenge. Psychological studies show that people overestimate their own grievances and underestimate those of others; this cognitive quirk fueled spiraling cycles of bloodshed.

But as the rise of civilization gradually changed the ground rules of society, violence began to ebb. The earliest states were brutal and despotic, but they did manage to take away opportunities for runaway vendettas.

More recently, the invention of movable type radically changed our social environment. When people used their powers of language to generate new ideas, those ideas could spread. “If you give people literacy, bad ideas can be attacked and experiments tried, and lessons will

accumulate,” Dr. Pinker said. “That pulls you away from what human nature would consign you on its own.”

And these ideas helped drive down violence even further. Ideas about equality led to women gaining power across much of the world, and “women are statistically more dovish than men,” Dr. Pinker said.

Reviews for the new book have been largely enthusiastic, though not unmixed. In *The New Yorker*, Elizabeth Kolbert called it “confounding,” “exasperating” and “fishy.”

“Hate and madness and cruelty haven’t disappeared,” she concluded, “and they aren’t going to.”

Dr. Pinker’s response was equally scornful. “No honest reviewer would imply that this is the message of the book,” [he wrote on his Web site](#).

Though violence has indisputably declined, he says, it could rise again. But by understanding the causes of the decline, humanity can work to promote peace. He endorses the new book “*Winning the War on War*” (Dutton/Penguin), by the political scientist Joshua S. Goldstein, which argues that the slogan “If you want peace, fight for justice” is precisely the wrong advice.

If you want peace, Dr. Goldstein argues, work for peace. Dr. Pinker agrees.

“It’s psychologically astute, given the massive amount of self-serving biases,” he said. “In any dispute, each side thinks it’s in the right and the other side is demons.”

The moral of his own book might be, If you want peace, understand psychology.



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